

TRANSLATING PORTUGUESE-WRITING AFRICA INTO ITALIAN: SKETCHING A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

Traduciendo África del portugués al italiano: esbozando un ambiente hostil

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ABSTRACT: The Italian literary space has proved to be very curious about translating and publishing works from Portuguese-Writing Africa, with the highest number of translations among the various western language-areas. However, its structure – with a deep interconnection between scholars/translators and small presses in the field of Portuguese – and the conservativeness of the public and of certain academic sectors cast doubts on the actual reach of these publications. The Italian reception of Postcolonial Studies is peculiar: many sources refer a delay, a fragmentation and even open hostility to its penetration into the Italian cultural field. The bulk of Italianists in Italy express their fears about perceived threats against the Italian literary canon.

Keywords: African literatures; translation; Italian language; literary canon; postcolonialism

1. WHAT HAS BEEN DONE: THE ITALIAN TRANSLATIONS FROM PORTUGUESE-WRITING AFRICA

The publishing system in Italian language has proven to be the most receptive of the African literary production originally written in Portuguese, with 89 published translations. Figures for published translations from the same literary space into French number 68, into Spanish 52, into English 38 and into German 30. These translations are temporally distributed in this way: 1960s: 5; 1970s: 0; 1980s: 2; 1990s: 10; 2000s: 35; 2010s: 38. The five translations of the 1960s were clearly published following the interest that the struggle for independence of the African Portuguese colonies had awoken in the Italian left-wing culture: the very translator of two of them (Joyce Lussu) was herself a partisan who had fought against the Fascist regime in Italy. After this decade, there was a silence stretching for more than 20 years. It is just at the end of the 1980s that new translations appear: Pepetela's *La rivolta della casa degli idoli*, by Bulzoni breaks this silence. In the following years new titles were published, both by authors linked to the anti-colonial struggle (Luandino Vieira, Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa and José Craveirinha) and by younger authors, such as Mia Couto or José Eduardo Agualusa, marking a shift of interest by the Italian publishing system to more contemporary instances. At the end of the 1990s, the steady and continuous interest showed both by certain publishing houses (Edizioni Lavoro in Rome and AIEP/Guaraldi in San Marino/Rimini) and by some translators (Vincenzo Barca and Livia Apa) demonstrates how a part of the Italian agents of translation and publication had begun paying more attention to this specific field of literary production. Two facts are remarkable in the decade of 2000s: the presence of Portugal at the Salone del Libro in Turin in 2006, and the beginning of two presses specialized partially or totally in translation from Portuguese: La Nuova Frontiera and Cavallo di Ferro, both in Rome. The first fact is to be noted because the Portuguese public agents in charge of the dissemination of the national language and literature abroad (Instituto Camões, and DGLB, Ministry of Culture) included African authors alongside Portuguese ones both in the support programme for translation and in the funding of authors' mobility, guaranteeing the physical presence of Mia Couto,

Agualusa and Paulina Chiziane in Turin. Translations from Portuguese-Writing Africa into Italian peaked around 2006 (4 titles published in 2005, 9 in 2006 and 5 in 2007). This shows how important is the role played by public patronage agents in the circulation of translated literature and the relevant role still played by the old colonial power in the circulation of the African literary production. The publishing house La Nuova Frontiera, founded in 1999, began a very close collaboration with the Lusitanist Giorgio De Marchis in 2003, which created the first case in which an academician from the area of Lusitanistics directed a book series dedicated almost exclusively to the African production. La Nuova Frontiera published 12 titles from Africa between 2003 and 2015, among which 4 titles by Agualusa, 3 by Paulina Chiziane and other titles by Germano Almeida and Manuel Rui. Cavallo di Ferro, founded in 2004 with the mission of translating and publishing exclusively Portuguese-Written literature, was the first example of such a specialized press in Italy, following a pattern that was already consolidated for other language areas. The only title this press published from Africa was *L'isola fantastica* by Germano Almeida in 2006. The 2010s confirm the continuing interest the Italian publishing system has shown. In this decade, the connection between academia, translation and publishing deepens: in 2009 I founded Edizioni dell'Urogallo, a publishing house totally dedicated to the translation of literary works from the Portuguese, with a special attention to the African and postcolonial production, crystallized in the book series Urogallo. *Frontiere perdute*, hosting exclusively titles from Africa and East Timor. With 20 titles published (18 of them from Africa) at the end of 2018, this book series is the largest publishing space dedicated to these literatures outside the Portuguese-Speaking area. In this series, 5 titles by Agualusa, 3 by João Melo, 3 by João Paulo Borges Coelho, 2 by Ana Paula Tavares, 1 each by Arménio Vieira, Paulina Chiziane, Mia Couto, Abdulai Sila and Germano Almeida were published. The involvement of younger Lusitanists in the field of translating and publishing is confirmed as a tendency by the fact that two more small presses were founded by young people that graduated in Italian universities in the discipline of Portuguese Literature: Vittoria Iguazú Editora in Leghorn and Tuga Edizioni in Bracciano. Both of these small presses resemble Edizioni dell'Urogallo in their independent organisation and in their dimension, but are not exclusively specialized in the translation from Portuguese. Both publishing houses published titles from the Portuguese-Speaking Africa, as is the case of *Hora di Bai* by Manuel Ferreira (VIE) in 2012 and *I predatori* by Pepetela (Tuga) in 2013. Out of the 89 titles considered for our research, 12 were translated by Vincenzo Barca, 8 by Giorgio de Marchis, 7 by Marco Bucaioni, 6 by Livia Apa and 4 by Daniele Petruccioli, confirming the special interest that some translators have dedicated to the African literary production. Only 6 of these translations have been published by presses that can be considered “big” (with a national distribution system and a relatively large power of dissemination: 4 by Guanda and 2 by Sellerio). The rest has been published by a constellation of medium or small publishing houses with no significant power of dissemination and distribution. The above mentioned tendency that some younger Lusitanists have shown more recently to start small presses in order to host literary translations from Portuguese contributes to exasperate this situation, and at the same time is a sign that medium and bigger-sized publishing houses do not seem to be very open to the publication of literary translations from Portuguese. Academia may play a fundamental role in the translating and publishing of a certain literary corpus in a certain country (Venuti, 1998): The Italian structure of translation and publishing from the Portuguese seems to be an extreme example of this, considering that academicians are playing sometimes not only the role of publishing counsellors or book series directors, but directly that of publishers. 49 translations have been co-funded by either DGLAB or Instituto Camões – more than 50% of their total number –, confirming the utmost importance of the public patronage system to translation (Lefevere 1992) and the central role played by the Portuguese literary space and its agents in the establishment of an African literary canon in Portuguese and of its internationalisation.

2. ITALIAN POSTCOLONIAL PECULIARITIES: LATENESS, FRAGMENTATION, AMBIGUITY, HOSTILITY

Most scholars and commentators converge in stating that Italy did not appropriate Postcolonial Theories and postcolonial literary material from Africa until very late and in a very fragmented way. Derobertis, introducing the volume *Fuori centro. Percorsi postcoloniali nella letteratura italiana*, edited in 2010 and dedicated to postcolonial literary production in Italian, still must justify this venture: “Ma perché confrontarsi, in Italia e nel campo della letteratura italiana, con gli studi postcoloniali?” (Derobertis 2010, 10).

In the answer to this seminal question we find some recurrent elements about postcolonialism in Italy:

In primo luogo vi è la *considerazione marginale* in cui sono ancora tenuti gli studi sul colonialismo italiano — *rimozione e sottostima del colonialismo e imperialismo italiani, associazione diretta e quasi esclusiva del colonialismo al ventennio fascista, sottovalutazione del colonialismo come strumento dell’Unità nazionale — soprattutto dal punto di vista culturale e letterario*. Quindi vi è in Italia un’attenzione ancora scarsa e piuttosto disordinata nei confronti di quelle scritture in italiano prodotte da soggetti in transito [...]. *A questo si aggiunge che vi è uno scarso interesse al modo in cui il testo letterario [...] articola le questioni di classe, genere e razza non soltanto nella contemporaneità*. Infine, si è riscontrata la necessità di non abbandonare la questione dell’“identità italiana” a *sterili dibattiti neo-tradizionalisti e all’incalzante celebrazione acritica del centocinquantesimo dell’Unificazione italiana*, recependo invece le istanze provenienti dalle (pur ambivalenti) argomentazioni multiculturaliste; del resto le migrazioni — le emigrazioni italiane all’estero, quelle dal Sud al Nord e le immigrazioni — sono fenomeni che hanno esposto l’“italianità” ad una irriducibile molteplicità (Derobertis 2010, 10-11 [italics are mine]).

This first element is the claim that Italy has somehow erased its own colonial memory, in this way denying any real importance to the colonial experience in shaping the contemporary situation of the nation. This would explain why many Italians seem to marginalise the colonial and postcolonial dimension of other literary spaces, given that they somehow don't pay the necessary attention to “their own” literary and cultural production around colonialism and its consequences. The second element is the claim that no substantial attention is paid by Italian critics and scholars to «race, gender and class questions» as articulated in the literary text, «not only in the contemporary field». The third and fourth important elements are the mention of «neo-traditionalists» and «acritic celebration of the National unity», because they take into account recent developments on the debate on national identity in Italy, apparently passing through a wave of acritic neo-nationalism, and because they ultimately speak about migrations, underlying the only aspect that seems to have triggered any consistent attention to the postcolonial mindsets. Recent migrations and current xenophobia are constantly recalled, as here:

Tuttavia, nell’oscillazione tra memoria e oblio, qualcosa deve essere andato perduto, altrimenti non si spiegherebbe perché, nel discorso contemporaneo [...], si eviti sistematicamente il ricorso alla storia coloniale (ancora così recente) per spiegare la relazione di attrazione morbosa e insieme di rifiuto xenofobico nei confronti dei e delle migranti che attraversano il presente italiano (Derobertis 2010, 14-15).

Derobertis continues mentioning one of the first “really postcolonial” publications in Italy, the 2004 issue of *Quaderni del '900* (Ponzanesi 2004), which:

aveva provato a tenere insieme l’analisi storica, letteraria e sociologica delle migrazioni con quella del colonialismo, con una prevalenza di interventi che facevano diretto riferimento alla letteratura critica di provenienza anglofona. Non a caso *sono stati gli studi di anglistica i primi ad introdurre in Italia gli studi postcoloniali, con grande ‘ritardo’ rispetto allo sviluppo di questi studi nel mondo anglofono e non senza reticenze*. Del resto, a non aver fatto i conti con la storia del colonialismo italiano, con il destino delle ex colonie e in generale con le dinamiche politiche, sociali, economiche e culturali della globalizzazione, *sono stati tutti gli studi letterari nell’accademia italiana, non solo quelli di italianistica. Quest’ultima, ridotta ormai a depositaria museale delle presunte e antichissime*

tradizioni "italiane" della letteratura "nazionale", è stata in assoluto la più ostile a confrontarsi con la complessa cassetta degli attrezzi degli studi postcoloniali.

Di fronte al diffuso scetticismo nei confronti di questi studi, accusati di essere un altro cavallo di Troia della presunta dilagante egemonia culturale anglo-americana, occorre registrare alcuni elementi utili al dibattito (Derobertis 2010, 23-25 [italics are mine]).

This picture of Italian Italianistics and academia in general is dismal: Derobertis states that no literary discipline in Italy has ever taken into account the «political, social, economical and cultural dynamics of globalisation». Let alone the Italian Studies Departments, that are considered the most hostile to a possible confrontation with a postcolonial mindset, seeing themselves as «museal depositaries of the National literature». The fact that Derobertis states that such theoretical mindset of the postcolonial ones are seen as a Trojan horse by the (hegemonic) Anglophone world is symptomatic of the state of the affairs. Claudia Gualtieri, in her article «Voci dell'Africa, dall'Africa in Italia» tries to trace the reception of African literatures in Italy. She registers the same delay denounced by Derobertis in the importation of this postcolonial apparatus:

Nella genealogia degli studi postcoloniali in Italia, si nota come l'uso del termine "postcoloniale" e l'interesse per le letture teoriche [...], siano partiti con un notevole ritardo rispetto, per esempio, ai paesi di lingua inglese e francese. (Gualtieri 2015)

One possible explanation for this delay would be the division of the Italian academic system:

Il tentativo di rintracciare il percorso evolutivo degli studi postcoloniali sull'Africa nell'anglistica italiana [...] incontra un primo ostacolo nella rigida divisione disciplinare e nella separazione degli ambiti di ricerca che caratterizzano l'africanistica in Italia (Gualtieri 2015).

Gualtieri points out an important fact: the division still standing today in Italian academics between the various “national” languages and literatures.

Coloro i quali erano sensibili alle nuove voci dall'Africa *si scontravano con un canone letterario rigido e immobile, e con lo scetticismo che ostacolava l'apertura delle università verso produzioni culturali viste come trasgressive dell'ordine estetico e ideologico dominanti*. Mancava un collegamento internazionale con il dibattito teorico intellettuale postcoloniale e mancava quella formazione critica e metodologica che si sarebbe potuta concretizzare solamente cercando di recuperare il tempo perduto (Gualtieri 2015, italics are mine).

We find it important to stress what Gualtieri sees as hostility by a rigid and immobile literary canon, and as sceptic reactions by academics against cultural productions seen as transgressive towards the aesthetic and ideological dominant order. At any rate, she concludes that there is not in Italy an aesthetic education to the taste of the spoken word coming from Africa: “Rimarcando come non ci sia, in Italia, un'educazione estetica al gusto della parola parlata che viene dall'Africa” (Gualtieri 2015).

In their most recent book (Lombardi-Diop 2012), Lombardi-Diop and Romeo try to trace the path of Postcolonialism in Italy, as Derobertis does in his introduction, beginning with the fact that “Unlike Britain, France, and the Netherlands, Italy did not experience large-scale spontaneous immigration from its former colonies after decolonization” (Lombardi-Diop 2012, 6).

After highlighting the same delay pointed out by the other scholars, and trying to explain its origins in a similar way, they insist on the question of Italianness (inside and outside the literary field):

The work of writers such as Pap Khouma and Igiaba Scego [...] exposes the sense of uneasiness generated for (white) Italians by the association of blackness with Italianness. These terms are often conceived as incompatible and therefore as mutually exclusive [...]. As we see in the work of first- and second-generation

writers, *italianità* seems unattainable for black Italians precisely because national belonging is generally understood in terms of specific traits (both cultural and biological) that cannot be simply acquired by a perfect mastery of the language and of the Italian way of life [...]. Postcolonial writing in Italy is often haunted by the denial of political and cultural citizenship (Lombardi-Diop 2012, 10).

It is evident that postcolonial literary writing in Italian for the first time arouses many questions about the national identity that, in the Italian case, remained not only unanswered, but mainly unasked, given the absence of a large-scale postcolonial migration into the country. If this situation for the first time imposes these questions, the focus shifts immediately to the Italian literary and cultural canon and to the role of literature as a social institution in the country: “The reassessment of the project of *italianità* in light of a postcolonial consciousness underlines the need for a reassessment of the Italian cultural and literary canon” (Lombardi-Diop 2012, 10).

After arousing these questions, Lombardi-Diop continues with a revisiting of the state of the art about postcolonialism in Italy, with statements very similar to both Derobertis's and Gualtieri's, about the delay of the postcolonial framework's reception and highlighting once more the “anglo-saxony” of such theories in the Italian perception:

the theoretical framework developed in the British context did not “translate” to the Italian one. For the most part, critical works on postcolonial theory and literature remained limited to Anglophone writers and authors. As a result, the idea that a postcolonial discourse had no reason to develop outside an Anglophone environment was reinforced, by implying that in Italy there was no postcolonial condition to speak of (Lombardi-Diop 2012, 11).

Itala Vivan, a very important figure in the translation, promotion and publication of African literature in Italy, in 2013 tries to review the state of the art of the reception of African literature in Italy in “Leggere l’Africa in Italia”. She also states without doubt that there is not a sufficient aesthetic education in order to properly receive African literary products:

Naturalmente oggi nessuno più avrebbe il coraggio di negare l’esistenza di un’importantissima tradizione africana di parola d’arte, e tuttavia in Italia manca l’educazione del gusto necessaria a un autentico incontro in questo settore (Vivan 2013, 3).

Vivan also states that there is a stubborn resistance against any canonical revision in Italy: “Il fattore di base di tale situazione, tuttavia, è la pervicace insistenza a non voler rivedere il canone letterario in senso generale” (Vivan 2013, 3).

She continues with a close analysis of the publishing history of the African literary word in Italian translation, highlighting strengths and feebleness of the various moments and groups that have dedicated themselves to or have neglected African literature. Even so, the picture that Vivan draws of Italian publishing and Africa is not so pessimistic, and it is dominated by a moderate optimism for the future: for example, speaking about the reception of postcolonialism, she says that, even if against a certain hostility, some attention has been paid to African literature, especially by younger scholars. Almost at the end of her paper, Vivan addresses some aesthetic questions that can have a great relevance to the circulation of African literature in Italy, or to the lack thereof:

Insomma, c’è una vasta varietà di situazioni che possono influire sulla formazione e il modo di essere di uno scrittore africano, producendo una scrittura assai *insolita* o addirittura *ostica* per un lettore italiano. Senza contare che *l’estetica implicita delle culture africane può suggerire tematiche e stili lontani dal gusto italiano corrente*. Ci sono quindi molte probabilità che uno scrittore africano che abbia anche successo in patria possa non incontrare il gusto del mercato italiano (Vivan 2013, 18 [italics are mine]).

In other words, the reassessment of the Italian literary canon and repertoire is to be made not only in the academic sphere, but should be brought to an educational and primary and high-school level, if we want to create a possible public for African literatures in Italy. The picture that emerges from the collection and juxtaposition of these scholarly voices on the reception of postcoloniality and of the African literary production is the representation of a country that, first of all, has just recently begun to engage with postcolonial theory. In doing so, some more hostile academic sectors identified postcolonialism (and other theoretical “novelties”) with an Anglo-Saxon hegemony that should be fought against in the name of national autonomy. The fact that postcolonialism was first appropriated by English Literature Centres is on the one hand possibly unavoidable, on the other hand dangerous to reinforce these false convictions. It was just after 2004 that some scholars tried to apply such theories to literary production in Italian, and they did so with a production by subjects thought as others (immigrants) and not on the national canon, as it has been proposed elsewhere. The country has received African literature firstly in the 1960s and 1970s following patterns of solidarity with the third world or the struggling guerrillas of the global south and has received some African literary material because of internationally unquestionable consecrating institutions (Nobel Prize, *cfr.* Vivan, 2013). For the rest, it largely otherwise ignores and marginalises the African production because it has a publishing system incapable of valorising it, and the country may be critically incapable of receiving it because of a lack of education towards the supposedly peculiar African literary taste. Finally, most of Italy does still consider this production as subaltern and essentially irrelevant.

3. ITALY: LITERARY CANON, LITERARY STANDARD, IDEOLOGY. PERCEIVED THREATS AND REACTIONS

The scholarly work of Matteo Di Gesù focuses precisely on canonical and theoretical preoccupation inside the discipline of Italian Italianistics, giving us a vivid image of the current situation. In *Palinsesti del moderno*, (2005) he tries to trace the state of the art of postmodern literature in Italy. His conclusions are essentially that Italy has produced literary forms and material that can be considered post-modern literature, but at the same time it has refused to receive a postmodern theoretical mindset. These conclusions resemble very nearly what we have just collected on postcolonialism. In fact, Di Gesù does not limit his research on postmodernist positions, but enlarges his view considering Cultural Studies in general, Gender Studies, Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Studies. In his opinion, the bulk of Italian Italinists have dismissed all the above mentioned theoretical frameworks considering them irrelevant to the Italian landscape. In a certain way, it is exactly what Lombardi-Diop states that has happened with postcolonialism: they simply “didn't translate”. Another text by Di Gesù – «L'affidabilità di un marchio garantito: “letteratura italiana” since 1871» (2011) – echoes what has been suggested before by post-colonial scholars, about the threat perceived by many conservative scholars. Di Gesù, after citing, among other titles, *La lettera che muore* by Gabriele Frasca, *Dopo la fine* by Giulio Ferroni and *Ascesa e caduta della grande letteratura italiana* by Cesare De Michelis (with very explicit titles), continues:

Nondimeno, calate nel contesto italiano e calibrate sullo specifico nazionale [...], queste analisi sembrano tradursi in un senso comune vago e generico, quando non in pose intellettuali piuttosto asfittiche e improduttive. Così, se davvero anche la letteratura italiana [...] rischia di disfarsi, le ragioni che legittimerebbero tali allarmi vengono spesso declamate quasi come in una lamentazione liturgica, come in una litania: crisi della critica letteraria, abdicazione degli intellettuali dalla loro funzione civile, *processi di globalizzazione e regionalizzazione*, dominio dell'immateriale, della rete e del digitale, e soprattutto *coesione nazionale a rischio*. [...] A ogni modo l'habitus dell'umanista, dell'italianista prevede che ci si lagni dei cupi tempi che ci attendono, [...]. Corollario di questa argomentazione cerimoniosa è l'invocazione rituale della

tutela di questa antica istituzione, onusta di secoli di gloria, imprescindibile collante per l'unità della patria, vanto e onore della nazione (Di Gesù 2013, 148-149 [*italics are mine*]).

And, below:

Per quanto confortevolmente rituale, pertanto, serve davvero a poco intonare commossi e malinconici epicedi per la lenta e inesorabile agonia, ovvero provare a mantenere piccole posizioni di retroguardia, invocare la tutela del patrimonio e del marchio garantito e affidabile (e in fin dei conti *domestico e rassicurante*) della "Letteratura italiana" e del suo insegnamento, o magari accontentarsi nel vederla ridotta a orpello da cartolina insieme al Colosseo e a Sofia Loren, alla Gioconda e alla nazionale di calcio. [...] nulla ci induce a credere che la letteratura italiana, a cominciare dalle interpretazioni forzose del suo canone, non possa tornare a essere utilizzata come strumento ideologico in funzione nazionalista, xenofoba, segregazionista (Di Gesù 2013, 148-149 [*italics are mine*]).

The terms "domestic" and "reassuring" are key-concepts in this way of seeing literature, as if the Italian literary specialist felt that anything undomestic would threaten his stability and needed thus to be reassured from such a dangerous event. Di Gesù's preoccupation that the national canon, in this way rigidly embalmed, could be used as an ideological instrument for nationalist, xenophobic and segregationist purposes echoes clearly Lombardi-Diop's preoccupations about Italianness and the literary production in Italian by non-natives. The bulk of Italian Italianistics seems to be in a crusade of conservativeness against: changes, openings, and marginal production trying to subvert the canon. And against recent theoretical advancements, feeling them as an attack from the English-Speaking world and Academia against domestic sound theories and good practises (this explains why Gualtieri complains about departments receiving African literatures "with traditional literary-critics mindset"). They seem to have invested in the work of sanctifying the national literature. They seem to feel national literature threatened by foreignising tendencies that would "diminish" the national literary grandeur. Indeed, it doesn't seem to be easy to convince these people or their pupils and followers that any African literary production is worth reading.

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